

# Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park



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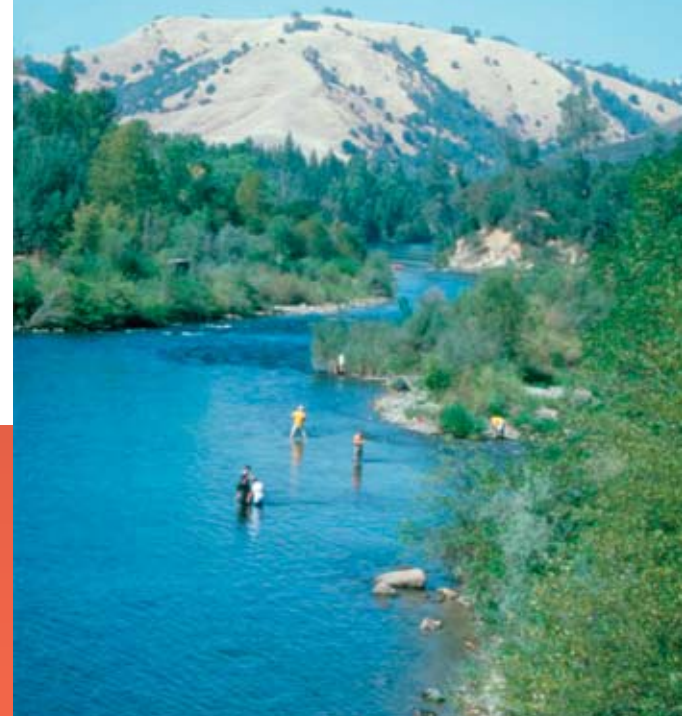
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**Marshall Gold Discovery  
State Historic Park**  
**P.O. Box 265**  
**Coloma, California 95613**  
**(530) 622-3470**

*“Monday 24<sup>th</sup>. This day  
some kind of mettle was  
found in the tail race  
that looks like goald, first  
discovered by James Martial,  
the Boss of the Mill.*

*—From Henry Bigler's Diary  
January 1848*



## *A*long California's historic Highway 49,

tucked neatly into a beautifully forested valley in the Sierra foothills, Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park straddles the South Fork of the American River. Here, on January 24, 1848, James Marshall found some gold flakes in the streambed and sparked one of history's largest human migrations.

### **PARK HISTORY**

#### **Native People**

For thousands of years, the Nisenan and foothill Miwok people built their dome-shaped houses in villages along the streams and tributaries that drained the American, Cosumnes, Bear and Yuba Rivers. They called their home along the American River "Cullumah,"

*Watercolor of an Eastern Miwok woman fashioning a seed gathering basket by Seth Eastman*

*Artwork courtesy of W. Duncan and Nevin MacMillan, and Afton Historical Society Press*



*The Marshall Monument*

now known as Coloma. Prior to foreign intrusion, they lived on a diet of animals, acorns, seeds and fruits. The hollowed out holes in a large bedrock in the park—the last remaining evidence of the native people's presence here—show how they processed the acorns that formed their main diet. As "river people" they enjoyed an abundance of freshwater fish as well as waterfowl, elk, deer and small game.

Until they met fur trappers in the late 1820s, the native people had little contact with the outside world. However, by the late 1830s, diseases introduced by the newcomers nearly decimated them. When gold was discovered along the American River in the Coloma Valley, hordes of gold-seekers seized control of the California Indians' fishing and gathering sites. By 1849 the remaining native people who had survived the combined hardships of disease and conflicts with settlers had dispersed to more remote areas of the Gold Country. A few turned to mining, and a few worked for John Sutter.

#### **JANUARY 24, 1848— THE GOLD DISCOVERY**

John Sutter was founder of "New Helvetia,"—

later named Sacramento—and a vast agricultural empire in the Sacramento Valley. He partnered with James W.

Marshall to go into the lumber business. They selected Coloma Valley, 45 miles east of Sutter's fort, as a mill site because it had a river for power and stands of large ponderosa pine trees for lumber. As equal partners, Sutter would furnish the capital, and Marshall would oversee the mill's construction and operation.

In the fall of 1847, Marshall began construction of the mill with a labor force that included both Indians and members of the U.S. Army Mormon Battalion. A low dam was built across the river to funnel part of the stream into the diversion channel that would carry it through the mill. By January of the next year, the mill was ready to be tested. However, the tailrace, which carried water away from the mill, was too shallow, backing up water and preventing the mill wheel from turning

properly. To deepen the tailrace, each day the Indian laborers loosened the rock. At night, water was allowed to run through the ditch to wash away the loose debris from that day's diggings.

On the morning of January 24, 1848, while inspecting the watercourse, Marshall spotted some shiny flecks in the tailrace. He scooped them up, and after bending them with his fingernail and pounding them with a rock,

he placed them in the crown of his hat and hurried to announce his find to the others. He told the mill workers,



*John A. Sutter*

*Photo courtesy of California State Library, Sacramento, California*



“Boys, by God, I believe I’ve found a gold mine.” When Mr. Scott—a carpenter working on the mill wheel—disputed his claim, Marshall replied positively, “I know it to be nothing else.” Marshall pounded it on a rock, and the cook, Jenny Wimmer, boiled it in lye soap. It passed all their tests—it was pure gold.

Four days later Marshall rode to the fort with samples of the gold. Sutter consulted his encyclopedia, tried various tests, and confirmed Marshall’s conclusion. Mindful of their investment in the mill, they agreed to keep the news secret until the mill was in operation. After all, this was not the first time gold had been discovered in California, and there was no reason to assume that this find was particularly important.

But it was a secret that could not be kept. In a letter to General Mariano Vallejo, Sutter bragged about the discovery. Mormon elder Sam Brannan, who operated a general store at the fort, went to the mill to see for himself. Several Mormon mill workers readily gave him a tithe of the gold they had found. When Brannan visited San Francisco in May, he paraded the streets waving a quinine bottle full of gold, shouting, “Gold! Gold!



*Early drawing of Sutter's Mill, c. 1849*

Gold from the American River!” By the end of May, San Francisco was reported to be “half empty” as the able-bodied men departed for the mines. The excitement grew when an army officer carried a tea caddy full of gold to Washington, D.C. Shortly after President James K. Polk confirmed the rumors, thousands came to join the trek to the Gold Country.

### CHINESE IMMIGRANTS

News of the gold discovery spread throughout the world. In China, California was called

Gum San—“Gold Mountain.” Chinese workers, lured to California by a promised golden mountain from which they could literally carve out their fortune, were fleeing years of war and poverty. Chinese miners at Coloma—thought to have numbered about 50—were so efficient at finding gold that other miners complained

of a “Chinese invasion.” Hostilities among the miners helped spark discriminatory taxes and laws enforced only against “foreign” miners.

The easy-to-find placer gold at Coloma played out early. By 1857 many miners had left, but a few Chinese miners remained to work the played-out placer sites. Two structures used by the Chinese remain in the park today—the Man Lee building, which housed a Chinese trading and banking company as well as a hardware store, and the Wah Hop Store, once leased to a Chinese merchant of that name. They currently house exhibits of gold mining techniques and the mercantile goods needed by the Chinese miners.

*Photo by Betty Sederquist*



*Living history program at the park's 49er Family Festival*



*The Wah Hop building—  
a Gold Rush-era Chinese store*

## AFRICAN AMERICAN SETTLERS

According to the Gooch-Monroe family's oral history, Peter and Nancy Gooch came to Coloma as slaves in 1849. The following year California became a free state. Peter Gooch worked in construction and at odd jobs, and Nancy did domestic chores for the miners. By 1861 Nancy had saved enough money to buy the freedom of her son, Andrew Monroe, who was still a slave in Missouri.

Andrew brought his wife, Sarah, and their three children to Coloma, where they became respected farmers. In the 1940s the State purchased some of the Monroe landholdings from Andrew Monroe's son, Pearley, which included the original site of Sutter's Mill and the site of Marshall's gold discovery—the foundation of today's park. The entire Gooch-Monroe family are buried in the park's Pioneer Cemetery.

## COLOMA, QUEEN OF THE MINES

In the wake of the hopeful gold seekers came merchants, doctors, lawyers, gamblers, ministers—all the services required to supply a miner and relieve him of his burdensome gold dust. From Coloma the miners moved up the canyons and into the mountains. With each new strike, and as the placer gold gave out, Coloma declined in population. By 1857 the El Dorado County seat had been transferred to nearby Placerville. By then the Chinese were almost



*The Monroe family: William, Grant, Pearley, Andrew Jr. (top); Cordelia, James, Andrew Sr., Sarah (middle); Garfield (bottom)*

the only miners working the gravel bars near the discovery site, and Coloma again became a peaceful community, with agriculture and transportation its economic base.

## THE DISCOVERER

In the late 1830s, New Jersey native James Marshall traveled west to Missouri, where he worked as a carpenter and farmed along the Missouri River. When his doctor advised him to seek a healthier

climate, Marshall joined a wagon train bound for Oregon in 1844, and in June 1845 he headed for California with a small party of settlers.

He arrived at Sutter's fort in July and was immediately hired as a wheelwright and carpenter. Craftsmen with his experience were scarce in California. Marshall purchased a ranch on Butte Creek, but after fighting alongside the Americans during their conquest of California in 1846, he returned home to discover his cattle strayed or stolen. He met again with John Sutter, who gave him the task of finding a site to build their new sawmill.

With the gold discovery, the sawmill at Coloma quickly lost its sleepy, peaceful aspect. In July 1848 Colonel Richard B. Mason visited the mill site and estimated the area's population at 4,000. By December 1848, flooding caused Sutter to sell his interest in

the mill, and Marshall took on two new partners. Later, management problems entangled the mill in legal difficulties, and after 1850 it was abandoned. Marshall spent the next few years searching for gold, with little success. In 1857 he bought fifteen acres of land in Coloma for \$15 and built a cabin near the Catholic church.

Investing in new and exotic varieties of grapevines, he planted a vineyard on the hillside above the cemetery, dug a cellar, and began to make wine for sale. By 1860 his vines were doing so well that his entry in the county fair received an award, but in the late 1860s, a series of setbacks sent him prospecting again. During this time Marshall became part owner of a quartz mine near Kelsey. Hoping to raise funds to develop the mine, he went on a lecture tour, only to find himself stranded



*James Wilson Marshall  
as sketched in 1849*

*"A frenzy had  
seized my soul...  
piles of gold rose  
up before me at  
every step; castles  
of marble...  
thousands of  
slaves...myriads  
of fair virgins...  
the Rothschilds,  
Girards, and  
Astors appeared  
to me but poor people."*



*Diary of J. H. Carson, 1852*



penniless in Kansas City. In a philanthropic gesture, Leland Stanford paid Marshall's fare to New Jersey where he visited his mother and sister. After a few months, he returned to Kelsey and moved into the Union Hotel.

In 1872 the State Legislature passed a bill to provide Marshall a pension of \$200 a month for two years. He paid some debts and equipped a blacksmith shop in Kelsey. The state pension was reduced by half for the next four years, but it ended in 1878 amid criticism of Marshall's personal habits—especially his weakness for liquor.

Marshall continued to work in his blacksmith shop and in the small gold mines he owned near Kelsey. When he died on August 10, 1885, at the age of 75, the man who dug his grave on the hillside was Andrew Monroe, the son of Nancy Gooch. In 1890 a monumental statue—California's first State Historic Monument—was commissioned and placed on the hill overlooking the gold discovery site to mark the location of Marshall's grave.

Photo by Ric Horner



*Cemetery and James Marshall's cabin*

### **What if gold had not been discovered?**

California was a pastoral backwater and wilderness in 1848. Nine days after Marshall's fateful discovery—at the conclusion of the Mexican-American War—the United States had been granted this land as part of a treaty. Its non-Indian population was about 14,000. At the time, only a few hundred overland pioneers had found ways to bring their wagon trains across the deserts and mountains to California. But that all changed with the discovery of gold.

Between 1848 and 1852, the world's fascination with California caused its non-Indian population to boom to more than 200,000. Few "Forty-Niners" intended to remain in California permanently—most had come to seek their fortune and then return home. But many sent for their families and stayed, while others returned later to become permanent residents.

Over the next 50 years, roughly 125 million ounces of gold taken from the hills had a critical effect on California's early development. If gold had not been discovered, California's climate, resources and location might have been ignored for a much longer time. There would have been

little interest in building a transcontinental railroad to bind the nation together. More importantly, without Marshall's momentous discovery, a more gradual influx of "foreigners" from the U.S. might have been quietly absorbed into California's Spanish/Mexican cattle- and agriculture-based economy. However, James Marshall spotted a shiny bit of metal in the tailrace at Sutter's mill, giving rise to one of the most culturally diverse and technologically advanced populations in the world.

### **THE PARK**

Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park, created in 1942, encompasses most of the historic town of Coloma. With about two hundred year-round residents in town and the surrounding area, the tree-lined streets of the park are usually quiet, shady and serene. Most visitors and students come

during spring, summer and fall or for special events year-round, including the annual celebration of the January 24 gold discovery.

A number of historic buildings and sites—including the blacksmith shop, the Price-Thomas and Papini homes, the Mormon, James Marshall, and Miner's cabins, and the Indian bedrock mortar—remain to remind us of that tumultuous period. One outstanding attraction of the park is the full-sized replica of Sutter's sawmill.

Photo by Ric Horner



*1858 St. John's Church*

The original, abandoned and torn down for its lumber, disappeared in the floods of the 1850s. The replica, looking much like the original, was completed in 1968 and is interpreted for park visitors. Some of the original mill's timbers, reclaimed from the river, are displayed nearby. Gold-panning activities are available year-round.

### THE GOLD DISCOVERY MUSEUM AND OTHER EXHIBITS

Exhibits in the Gold Discovery Museum tell the story of John Sutter and James Marshall, and how drastically the simple act of noticing a small fleck of gold would alter the lives of hundreds of thousands of people from that day to the present. The museum also has Indian and Gold Rush-era exhibits, including mining equipment, horse-drawn vehicles, household implements and other memorabilia, as well as films about the gold discovery and early mining techniques. Next door to the museum are an outdoor mining exhibit and two original buildings used by the Chinese. Throughout the park, the exhibits show the various standards of living as Coloma developed through time. The Gold Discovery Loop Trail makes it easy to visit the site of Marshall's momentous discovery, the original mill site, as well as other points of interest.

You can walk under native Californian trees, as well as the Chinese Tree of Heaven, black locust, Texas mesquite, southern pecan, Osage orange, persimmon and others planted by homesick miners as reminders of their former dwellings.

### ACCESSIBLE FEATURES

#### Hiking

The half-mile Gold Discovery Loop Trail, from the museum to the gold discovery overlook site, is mostly level and hard packed, but some slopes may require assistance.

#### Picnicking

The North Beach group picnic area has accessible tables with generally accessible restrooms and parking nearby. The picnic area near the Wah Hop Store and Mann Lee exhibits has accessible tables that may be usable with assistance.

### Exhibits

The accessibly-designed Gold Discovery Museum has restrooms, self-guided exhibits and an audio-visual theater. Video captioning and large print brochures are available.

Accessibility is continually improving. For current details, call the park, or visit <http://access.parks.ca.gov>.

### PLEASE REMEMBER

- The museum and historic buildings are open from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. daily, and may be open longer depending on availability of staff. They are closed on Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's days. Park grounds are open daily, 8:00 a.m. to sunset.
- Check the current schedule for interpretive programs at the museum/visitor center, or visit the park's website.
- Call the park to arrange to have your wedding in either of the park's historic churches or on the park's grounds.
- There is no camping in the park, but the Coloma and Lotus communities have several private campgrounds and stores. Recreational gold panning, with hands and pan only, is allowed in designated areas.



- Help keep the park clean. Whatever you bring in, please take out with you.
- Stay on the trails—shortcuts destroy ground cover and speed erosion. The river shoreline has submerged obstacles and an uneven bottom, and the water level and flow change quickly and often. Diving is not permitted.
- Dogs must be on a leash and are not permitted in historic buildings, on trails, outside of developed areas, or on beaches.
- To guarantee access to the park, groups of ten or more must make advance reservations. For more information call (866) 240-4655, or visit our website at [www.parks.ca.gov](http://www.parks.ca.gov).



This park is supported in part through a nonprofit organization. For more information contact: Gold Discovery Park Association • P.O. Box 461 • Coloma, CA 95613 • (530) 622-6198 • [www.marshallgold.org](http://www.marshallgold.org)

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